

Zone out and your money flows away; go with the flow and your money might stay

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In her 2012 book “Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas”, cultural anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll drew attention to a pervasive phenomenon in gambling addiction called “the Zone”: a state of dissociation in which long-term machine gamblers feel “one with the machine” and disconnected from the worries of their daily lives. To them, being in the Zone is both calming and deliberating. Playing is no longer about the thrill of the win (which it might have been in the past), but about maximizing time on machine and in the Zone – sometimes to the point of barely eating, urinating or sleeping for days, isolated from social contacts.

According to Schüll, what typically dispels the Zone is either no longer having access to money, or an overwhelming urge to go relieve oneself. At this point, when the deliberating calm of the Zone is gone, players feel sadness, guilt, shame and disappointment. Staying in the Zone steadily corrodes their finances and social life, and is at the heart of gambling addiction for many machine gambling regulars.

The Zone is comparable to a phenomenon known in positive psychology as “flow”, which has been studied extensively for many decades, most notably by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1990). Flow is a state of complete involvement in an activity for its own sake: The sense of self is attenuated, sense of time is distort-

ed, and the person feels challenged and skilled. The enjoyable and engaging state of flow can be experienced in virtually any activity from surfing to playing chess. However, experiencing flow can also have adverse consequences, as noted by Csíkszentmihályi (1990, p. 62):

Enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative effect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.

This account underscores the similarities between flow and the Zone, which are further evidenced by various reports of flow experiences. For example, active surfers are often drawn to surfing because it induces flow. However, they have also reported feeling controlled by their surfing and unable to function “normally” in their social relations due to a heavy involvement with the sport (Partington, Partington, & Olivier, 2009). Moreover, skilled chess players in a flow state have been known to forget eating, drinking, or even urinating during a long and challenging match (Csíkszentmihályi, 2000). Finally, video/computer game players have died

of exhaustion and dehydration after marathon gaming-sessions lasting for days (“S Korean dies”, 2005).

Despite these negative effects, the surfers, the chess and video game players alike typically feel their flow experiences have accomplished them something worthwhile (the extreme cases resulting in death notwithstanding). This resonates with the general scientific consensus that flow is associated with increased well-being.

Given the similarities between flow and the Zone, it is peculiar that the former is generally viewed as a positive, life-affirming experience, whereas the latter as an utterly negative, corrosive and ultimately life-endangering predicament. As noted above, both flow and the Zone can be characterized by social isolation and transient dissociation. Perhaps whether these dissociative states end up being life-affirming or detrimental depends partly on the pre-existing mental and social conditions of the individual experiencing them. Dissociative states might be more “Zone-like” if sought as a means to escape one’s worries by individuals who already feel severely stressed. Conversely, healthy people might be predisposed to experience “flow-like” dissociation without an urge to escape any underlying life adversities.

However, it also seems that an important difference between the Zone and flow is related to money. One of the most salient stressors for many people is (lack of) money, and escaping this stress into the Zone of machine gambling can start a vicious circle: losing money in the Zone is a constant reminder of what the person sought to forget. We thus wonder what the machine gamblers’ Zone would be like, if playing was actually profitable. What if

the players could steadily *increase* their bankrolls by playing?

This question is obviously hypothetical, but it can be indirectly assessed via poker – a game of both skill and chance. Depending on poker players’ skill levels, their decisions are either profitable (winning players) or detrimental (losing players) in the long run. Flow experiences are common also among poker players (Tendler, 2013). However, we suspect the nature of these experiences depends on players’ skills. Losing poker players with highly stressful lives might play poker to escape their stress into “Zone-like” states. In contrast, winning players (even those with stressful lives) might have a better chance to enter the life-affirming flow state: Making a long-term monetary profit probably alleviates the aforementioned vicious circle along with its adverse effects.

We believe a fruitful line of future research involves evaluating the associations between poker players’ level of experience and skill, the nature and extent of their flow experiences, and their general well-being. It is plausible the frequency of flow states is positively associated with well-being primarily for winning players. For losing players – particularly those with stressful lives – a dissociative flow state might resemble the machine gamblers’ Zone, thus predicting reduced well-being. These notions are probably more evident in online than “live” poker, as decisions are typically made in rapid succession in both online poker and machine gambling. Our hypotheses are also in line with recent evidence showing that level of poker experience (and skill) is positively associated with measures of emotion self-

regulation proficiency (Laakasuo, Palomäki, & Salmela, 2014; Palomäki, Laakasuo, & Salmela, 2013).

To conclude, we suspect that the adverse long-term effects of the machine gamblers' Zone are more tied to its financial consequences and to the players' underlying life conditions than to the phenomenological content of the experience itself. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the possibility that dissociative flow-experiences might have beneficial consequences for specific

sub-groups of gamblers, such as skilled poker players.

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